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ABSTRACT

Institutional bonding was examined at a public, urban commuter college with exceptionally high attrition and visibly low morale. Changes in bonding and attrition were measured 6 years after a 2-year effort to develop school identity and student feelings of membership. It was found that a simple index of campus morale is provided by level of student feelings of membership in the college, feelings they readily articulate. Bonding tends to occur early in college life, but the general level of bonding on a campus can change over time. School identity is important; its major elements and keys to college membership can be assessed. Further, bonding relates to, but goes beyond, satisfaction with campus social life. Bonding relates to having friends on campus, but not to the closeness of the friendships. Families influence college attendance for some, an influence continuing throughout the college career. Increased independence from family influence occurs in upperclassmen with the most definite career plans. Family encouragement and collegiate background relate to social participation and campus friendships. Recommendations were to: intensify bonding efforts, particularly with freshmen; promote school identity and campus friendship building; and build family support, including family bonding. (Author/SW)

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INSTITUTIONAL BONDING

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INSTITUTIONAL BONDING

Abstract

Institutional bonding was examined at a public urban commuter college with exceptionally high attrition and visibly low morale. Changes in bonding and attrition were measured six years later after a two year effort to develop school identity and student feelings of membership.

It was found that a simple index of campus morale is provided by level of student feelings of membership in the college; feelings they readily articulate. Bonding tends to occur early in college life, but the general level of bonding on a campus can change over time. School identity is important; its major elements are keys to college membership and many can be assessed.

Further, bonding relates to, but goes beyond, satisfaction with campus social life. Bonding relates to having friends on campus, but not to the closeness of the friendships.

Families influence college attendance for some, an influence continuing throughout the college career. Increased independence from family influence occurs in upperclassmen with the most definite career plans. Family encouragement and collegiate background relate to social participation and campus friendships.

Recommendations included intensifying bonding efforts, particularly with freshmen; developing school identity; transmitting the keys to membership; encouraging campus friendships; and building family support, including family bonding.

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Institutional Bonding

Commitment to an institution rests in part on the development of ties between the student and his college. The emotional dimension of these ties has been largely unrecognized by researchers and enrollment managers.

Frequently, the feeling seems to be that if you "match" the student to the institution well enough, and if you provide enough services, you've done about all you can, and maybe the "marriage" will take and the student will "fit". In practice, the development of bonds between student and school is largely a matter of chance at many colleges, but it needn't be.

Emotional attachments to an institution can be strongly encouraged by support systems carefully designed to meet emotional and motivational needs. Most schools have isolated support programs; few have constructed comprehensive systems.

To effectively encourage bonding requires three basic ingredients: an understanding of the sources of student motivation and emotional support, the systematic use of these support sources and a strong institutional identity combined with a concerted effort by the college to transmit the keys to membership as soon as possible.

The research reported in this paper focuses on bonding and its correlates and also on the impact of family motivational support. It is part of an ongoing longitudinal research program conducted at a New England college. It is in one sense, a case study.

METHOD

The school is a public, urban, four year commuter college with about 3,000 full time, and 800 part time, students. The student body is ethnically mixed and primarily blue collar.

Six years ago when the research began, the college had very high attrition, graduating only 20 percent of its entering freshman class, and very low morale that was readily apparent to everyone.

The study began with a small sample of structured, open-ended interviews, followed by a questionnaire administered to 655 freshmen, 399 transfer students and a combined sample of 251 sophomores, juniors and seniors who had been at the college continuously.

The research sought to document on a large scale, with hard data, in nonpsychological terms, just how little the students felt themselves to be a part of the college. It also set out to explore some of the dimensions of student motivation.

A general recommendation to develop a comprehensive and systematic plan to build institutional identity and student ties was made following this research. Specific proposals illustrated how to foster school identity and build upon basic emotional support sources to give students a feeling of membership in the school. Unfortunately, the concepts of emotional ties and institutional bonding fell on deaf administrative ears. Perhaps it sounded too psychological.

The proposals as well as the terribly low retention rate were ignored until two years ago when a new administration began to be consider school identity and morale seriously.

Since then, a fair number of the sample proposals have been implemented in part, but no comprehensive or systematic plan has yet been devised. The retention rate has improved in the last two years, however. The college now graduates 28 percent of its freshmen.

Last year, the second study of bonding was conducted using a questionnaire similar to that used six years ago, thereby providing an opportunity to measure changes in bonding.

THE FINDINGS: BONDING

Bonding was measured very simply by asking students to what extent they felt themselves to be a part of the college. Responses were made in four categories: "Not at all", "Not very much", "Somewhat", and "Completely."

The bonding level was rather low in both 1978 and 1984, matching the generally observable low campus morale. (See Table 1). In both studies, most students felt they were only "somewhat" a part of the college. The average response in every sample fell somewhere between the "Not very much" and "Somewhat" categories.

Class Level. Bonding did not increase after the freshman year; upperclassmen did not feel more a part of the college than did freshmen. Last year there were no bonding differences among the three samples. Six years ago, the trend was negative with freshmen feeling significantly greater belonging than transfer students who felt significantly greater belonging than the combined sophomore-junior-senior sample.

At this college, with bonding occurring early in the student's career and with attrition rates highest in the freshman year, it is clear that intensive bonding efforts should begin right away with freshmen. This coincides with the U.S. Education Department's recommendation that collegiate resources be concentrated "on the first two years of college...when students seem most vulnerable and least supported by the learning environment." (1984)

Six Year Change. Bonding increased over the six year period. Freshmen in 1984 expressed significantly more membership in the college than did freshmen in 1978. The same was true of the combined sophomore-junior-senior sample and also of the transfer sample. (See Table 1).

The increase in bonding over the six years reflects both the visible improvement in campus morale and the documented improvement in retention occurring in the last two years.

In spite of improved bonding, only 17 percent of last year's students felt "completely" a part of the college. There is still much room for improvement in the area of morale and bonding.

School Identity. To add depth to the measure of belonging to the college, questions homing in on the most tangible elements of school identity were posed. The questions asked for information about the things that "insiders" know. Students were asked to name the President of the college, the Dean, the school colors, the traditions, the alma mater, the fight song, campus symbols, and so forth.

The low level of student bonding was reflected in the responses to these information questions, too. In 1978, most students knew little that goes with group membership. Most could name only the school colors; one-third could name the President and less than five percent could name a dean (any dean). Only one tradition was named and no one knew anything about an alma mater or a fight song or any symbols. (It turned out that there were only two traditions at the college, the alma mater had not been played in 15 years and there was no fight song.)

The low identity situation of six years ago has improved somewhat. Last semester every student could name the school colors and nearly everyone knew the President. One-third could name a dean and a few named symbols. It was too soon for the data on traditions, alma mater and fight song to change. More traditions and more symbols were added last year and a fight song written, but it takes more than one year to establish these. The improvement in "insider's" knowledge between 1978 and 1984 matches the improvement in bonding, retention rates and campus morale between these years.

Although originally intended only to corroborate and enrich the bonding data, the questions on membership information proved to be a valuable index to school identity and one readily understood by the administration. The data revealed that the college had few of the trappings that give a school identity--few symbols, few shared behaviors, and almost no ritual. There was little to invite membership; in truth, there was little with which the student could identify six years ago.

The elements that give an institution identity are also the keys to membership in that institution. It is important to develop identity, for the college must be seen as more than an extension of high school or just a place to mark time. Equally important, the college must transmit the membership keys quickly to incoming students. Traditional college students are searching for a path to the adult world. They know *who* they are, but not *where* they belong. If ties are to develop, the college must become the place where students *belong*.

Bonding and Social Activity. Campus participation was greater for those who felt more a part of the school than for those of peripheral membership, but, while social aspects of campus life did relate to bonding, feelings of membership in the college involve more than a satisfying social life.

Most correlations between bonding and social satisfaction and participation were positive and significant for every group except the seniors. (See Table 2). They were only moderately high, however, (in no case accounting for more than 37% of the variance) indicating that bonding has other dimensions, too.

Bonding and Friendships. Social bonds are important to psychological well being. It is well known that loneliness or relative isolation is apt to impair one's functioning. (Rook, 1984). The ramifications of this for academic performance and successful achievement of personal goals are obvious.

Social bonding in the form of institutional attachment and social bonding in the form of campus friendships are likely facilitate each other. The shared experiences that build membership in an institution provide a common denominator for social interaction. Social interaction expands opportunities

for friendships. Friendships, in turn, mean people to do things with and thereby expand the likelihood of campus participation and the sharing of experiences...

The number of campus friends related to bonding. The correlations in Table 2 indicate that except for freshmen and transfers, having more campus friends tended to mean greater bonding to the college. The closeness of campus friendships did not relate to bonding for any sample. The t tests in Table 3 show that feelings of membership in the college were not affected by whether or not closest friends attended the college.

Commuter colleges often feel they cannot "compete" with the established close friendships of the commuting student's "home world" and they fail to make efforts to bond or to promote friendships. The study findings indicate this is a mistake. Campus friendships go with bonding. Campus membership does not require that the student's closest friends be members--only that there be friends at the college and the more friends, the better.

THE FINDINGS: THE FAMILY

For traditional students, the college years are a time of increasing independence from the family on one hand, yet on the other, family ties are strong and relative lack of parental support characterizes dropping out and college failure. (Tibby, 1984). The family is an oft overlooked potential source of motivation for bonding, especially at commuter colleges where the majority of students daily go home to families that live close enough to be drawn onto campus frequently.

Awareness of Family Influence. Many students express an awareness of the influence of their families. In 1978, 10 to 26 percent of them listed "family expectation" as a major reason for attending college. In 1984, comparable figures of 12 to 24 percent were found. These figures are apt to underestimate actual family influence for they do not include students unaware, or unwilling to admit, family influence.

A second measure of direct family influence asked: Do you think you would go to college if your family did not approve? Some degree of dependence on family approval was found at all class levels. In 1978, 19 to 25 percent of the samples said either they "might not", "probably would not" or "Definitely would not" attend college if their families disapproved. Similarly, in 1984, 17 to 26 percent responded in the same fashion. These figures, too, report only admitted family influence.

Changes in Family Influence. Responses to the question of college attendance without family approval were examined separately for the four class levels. No senior independence manifested itself. The response percentages were similar for all class levels including upperclassmen whose time and financial investment in their education was far more than that of the freshmen.

Some evidence of increasing independence did appear, however, when attendance-without-family-approval was correlated with how sure the student was of his career plans. The correlations were not significant for freshmen or sophomores, but were for juniors ($r = .49$, $df = 38$, $p < .01$) and seniors

($r = .64$, $df = 31$, $p < .01$). The more definite the career plans of the upperclassmen, the more determined they said they were to attend college in the face of family disapproval.

Family Encouragement Two indexes of family encouragement were constructed. The first summed the sources of family encouragement and the second combined family encouragement and collegiate background.

Neither index related to satisfaction with campus life; only once did one relate to attachment to the college (seniors). Family support did relate to some social measures for freshmen, sophomores and juniors; but not for seniors or transfers. (See Table 4). The meaning of the pattern of relationships is not clear, but it appears that greater family support does relate in some manner to increased friendships and campus activity.

The family directly influences college attendance and indirectly relates to bonding through campus friendships and social participation. Both influences suggest the value of efforts to bond the families themselves to the college. Commuter schools have an edge over residential schools here due to the geographic proximity of large numbers of student families.

In summary, students have feelings of membership (or lack of it) in a college; feelings they can articulate and which can be measured. These feelings provide a quick objective index of campus morale. Bonding tends to occur early in college life, but the level of bonding at a college can change over time.

School identity is important. Its major elements are keys to college membership and many can be catalogued and assessed.

Bonds relate to, but go beyond, satisfaction with campus social life. Bonding is related to having friends on campus, but not to the closeness of the friends.

Student families influence college attendance for some, an influence that continues during the entire college career. Increased independence from family influence is manifest in upperclassmen with the most definite career plans. Family encouragement and collegiate background relate to social participation and campus friendships.

It is recommended that colleges:

- intensify bonding efforts, particularly with freshmen.
- develop school identity and transmit the keys to membership (e.g., the shared behaviors, symbols, rituals and traditions.
- encourage campus friendships.
- build family support, bonding if possible.

Limitations. A limited study such as this one cannot provide firm conclusions. There is no way to know for certain that the school identity and bonding recommendations implemented were responsible in whole or part for the improved retention and bonding. The sample sizes were not large in the 1984 study and although the findings form a consistent and coherent picture of this college, it should be remembered that it is a commuter, blue collar college and one with an especially severe identity and retention problem.

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Table 1

Extent to Which Students Felt Themselves a Part of the College

	1978		
	Freshmen f (%)	So/Jr/Sr ^a f (%)	Transfer f (%)
4. Completely	36 (16)	15 (10)	28 (11)
3. Somewhat	116 (50)	60 (42)	110 (45)
2. Not very much	76 (33)	30 (21)	86 (35)
1. Not at all	4 (2)	39 (27)	20 (8)
Total	232 (101)	144 (100)	244 (99)
Mean	2.79	2.35	2.59
S.D.	.71	.99	.29

	1984		
	Freshmen f (%)	So/Jr/Sr ^a f (%)	Transfer f (%)
4. Completely	5 (17)	16 (17)	6 (17)
3. Somewhat	21 (70)	62 (65)	18 (50)
2. Not very much	4 (13)	16 (17)	12 (33)
1. Not at all	0 (0)	2 (2)	0 (0)
Total	30 (100)	96 (101)	36 (100)
Mean	3.03	2.95	2.83
S.D.	.55	.64	.70
Z	19.58*	54.19*	17.20*

^aClass data combined to permit comparison with 1978 data.

*Significant at .01 level

Table 2

Correlations between the Extent to which Students Felt Themselves a Part of the College and Friendship and Social Satisfaction Measures

	Frosh df=30	Soph df=25	Junior df=39	Senior df=36	Trans df=34
	r	r	r	r	r
Social Participation ^b	.28	.53**	.46**	.13	.00
Social Satisfaction	.35*	.39*	.61**	.31	.40*
Number of Campus Friends	.21	.48*	.46**	.39*	.15

^a1984 data.

*Significant at .05 level.

^bIndex of Activities Participation, weekly socializing, and satisfaction with social activities.

**Significant at .01 level.

Table 3

Comparisons of the Institutional Bonding^a Levels of Students with and without Closest Friends on Campus

	Closest Friends on Campus			Closest Friends not on Campus			
	N	Mean	SD	Mean	S.D.	t	df
Freshmen	30	2.81	.54	3.00	.55	-.93	28
Sophomores	26	3.33	.62	2.91	.54	1.86	40
Juniors	39	3.04	.72	2.85	.55	.92	37
Seniors	30	2.94	.44	2.64	.74	1.29	28
Transfers	36	2.79	.71	2.88	.70	-.39	34

^aMeasured by the Extent to which the Students Felt Themselves a part of the college.

Table 4

Correlates of Family Background and College Encouragement^a

	INDEX A Family College Encouragement				
	Frosh df=29	Soph df=25	Junior df=39	Senior df=32	Trans df=39
	r	r	r	r	r
Social Satisfaction	-.17	-.16	.05	.15	-.27
Quality of College Experience	-.05	.12	.11	-.05	-.08
Feeling a Part of the College	.23	.18	.15	-.21	.07
Number of Activities	.18	.38	.36	.04	.20
Hours of Socializing	.16	.14	.36	.06	-.08
Number of Campus Friendships	.48**	.49*	.20	.30	.14

	INDEX E Family Encouragement and Background				
	Frosh df=30	Soph df=25	Junior df=40	Senior df=33	Trans df=40
	r	r	r	r	r
Social Satisfaction	.08	.10	.03	-.25	-.22
Quality of College Experience	-.04	.02	.10	-.07	-.17
Feeling a part of the College	.25	.02	.19	-.39*	-.08
Number of Activities	.29	.50*	.48**	.15	.31
Hours of Socializing	.36*	-.03	.43**	.03	-.07
Number of Campus Friendships	.41*	.57**	.39	.12	-.02

^a1984 data.

*Significant at .05 level.
**Significant at .01 level.